

**Finding Voice through Political Action?  
Perceptions of Participatory Efficacy in Brazil's 2018 Presidential Election**

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**Abstract:** Increasingly, political scientists view political efficacy (that is, a belief that the system responds to “people like me”) as dynamic. How does efficacy change over the course of an election? What types of participation do citizens view as most effective, and do those perceptions change during election cycles? Drawing on responses from an original five-wave online election panel conducted during and after Brazil’s 2018 presidential election as well as AmericasBarometer surveys, we describe and model changes in respondents’ sense of political efficacy, zeroing in on their beliefs about the relative efficacy of protest and voting as alternative modes of political action. In the aggregate, we show that perceptions of efficacy shifted dramatically throughout the election and that perceptions of the relative importance of elections as a mode of political action made substantial gains. Our results have important implications for understanding the dynamic nature of efficacy in general and for understanding the remarkable outcomes of the 2018 Brazilian election.

Across the world, citizens are losing faith in democracy. Support for democracy as a system of governance is in decline, and trust in core regime institutions is also flagging (Claassen 2020). Elections are the lifeblood of democracy, and yet turnout rates are falling. According to the World Bank (2017), average global voter turnout decreased by nearly 20 percent during the second half of the twentieth century. While most citizens continue to view elections as important (World Values Survey 2014), a majority of respondents worldwide are dubious of electoral integrity in their country (Gallup 2015). At the same time, participation in protests and other more contentious forms of political behavior is on the rise (Dalton et al. 2009; Moseley 2018), signifying that a growing number of citizens are looking to extra-institutional modes of pursuing representation and accountability in addition to or in lieu of formal channels.

What types of participation do citizens view as most effective for obtaining responsiveness from their elected representatives? How do those perceptions evolve throughout the course of an election cycle? The losers' consent perspective (Anderson et al. 2005; Anderson and Mendes 2006) posits that losers experience stagnant or declining efficacy and increased reliance on contention, while winners report renewed confidence in the responsiveness of the political system. Others have argued that electoral campaigns boost political awareness and efficacy, as previously disengaged citizens process new information, improve their understanding of the system, and come to feel that the system is indeed responsive to people like them. But few studies have asked citizens to weigh the relative utility of different forms of participation, nor has much extant work observed changes in perceptions of participatory efficacy throughout the course of electoral campaigns. Do elections fuel contentious attitudes and behavior among losers, or boost faith in formal processes throughout the electorate?

We argue that in the context of free and fair elections, the electoral process itself can bolster perceptions of political efficacy associated with formal modes of political participation, regardless of outcome. Conversely, by providing a formal outlet for political voice and vehicle for representation, elections can *decrease* the perceived efficacy of protesting. We find that increases in the perceived efficacy of electoral participation versus protest are slightly larger among election winners—but increases in the perceived efficacy of electoral participation are particularly significant among citizens who are more interested in politics and follow the election closely. Elections thus supply citizens with information about how the system works, which in turn builds efficacy associated with electoral participation.

To test our argument, we draw on an original five-wave panel study of Brazil fielded during the 2018 presidential election, which asks respondents to weigh the relative usefulness of different forms of political participation. In the aggregate, we show that perceptions of efficacy shifted dramatically throughout the election and that attitudes regarding the relative importance of electoral participation as a mode of political action made substantial gains, especially among those whose interest was piqued by the campaign.

This paper thus contributes to our understanding of political efficacy, a variable that was traditionally viewed as stagnant, but according to our study fluctuates significantly throughout the course of elections. We also test competing theories of efficacy—notably, the “losers’ consent” perspective, which argues winners experience boosts in efficacy while losers report stable or declining efficacy, and informational models that explore the effects of campaigns on political awareness among citizens. Finally, we interrogate citizen perceptions of different repertoires of political behavior, contributing to an expansive literature on contentious politics that has to this

point provided only oblique evidence regarding the calculus underlying citizen choices of participation.

### **Dynamics of Political Efficacy**

The concept of political efficacy refers to citizens' ability to participate effectively in politics—*internal* efficacy taps citizens' comprehension of key issues and the system itself, whereas *external* efficacy captures individuals' perceptions of the extent to which the political system is responsive to people like them (Craig et al. 1990). Traditionally, efficacy was viewed as an independent variable—i.e., citizens who understand politics and believe the system works are likelier participants in civic life (e.g., Abramson and Aldrich 1982). But Finkel's work (1985; 1987) confirmed that electoral participation might also shape external efficacy, even if internal efficacy remains a fairly stable trait.

Over the long run, free and fair elections would seem to be the principal institutional mechanism for instilling efficacy in citizens. By allowing voters to express their preferences and hold representatives accountable, elections should build faith in the electorate that the institutions that represent them are responsive to them. Further, elections offer an opportunity for individuals to educate themselves about key issues and learn democratic citizenship.

Yet there is growing evidence worldwide that mass publics increasingly view elections with skepticism. Faith in elections as a means to obtain political representation from government appears to be in decline in the U.S. (Lipset and Schneider 1983). As of 2019, only about 4 in 10 U.S. citizens expressed confidence in the honesty of elections—a significant decline from only a decade prior (Gallup 2019). In Latin America, trust in elections has also decreased across the region (AmericasBarometer 2008-2019). Turnout rates have fallen worldwide (World Bank 2017),

and support for anti-system candidates, who openly flout the institutions and norms of democracy, has been rising. Much extant work has attributed support for populist authoritarians to widespread disaffection with respect to politics as usual, including elections and the options on offer (e.g., Spruyt et al. 2016).

There is evidence that external efficacy increases during elections (Finkel 1985). But few studies have interrogated how citizens view elections specifically as a means of obtaining responsiveness from government. Lipset and Schneider (1983) utilize an item from the American National Election Study (ANES) to document a decline in the percentage of U.S. respondents who believe “elections make the government pay attention to what the people think.” Bartels (2002) argues that this decline is an artifact of question wording, and notes an increase in the perceived efficacy of elections following the 1992 presidential campaign. Daniller and Mutz (2019) draw on the same survey item and find that perceptions of electoral integrity increase for winners following campaigns, and decrease among losers.

To ask citizens about the effectiveness of elections in eliciting the attention of public officials implies that other forms of citizen behavior might also serve to make people’s voices heard. To our knowledge, no existing study has inquired about the relative perceived usefulness of different modes of political participation, much less explored how those evaluations change over the course of an election.

### **Finding Efficacy through Contention?**

Scholars focused on “unconventional” repertoires of participation—including protest demonstrations, strikes, and riots—have also sought to understand how institutional processes shape the attitudes and choices of collective actors. Research on political opportunities and protest

investigates “exogenous factors [that] enhance or inhibit prospects for mobilization, for particular sorts of claims to be advanced rather than others, for particular strategies of influence to be exercised, and for movements to affect mainstream institutional politics and policy” (Meyer and Minkoff 2004, 1457-8).

A large body of work indicates that citizens choose protest when they perceive that institutions are not working very well (Eisinger 1973; Machado et al. 2011; Boulding 2014; Moseley 2018). Eisinger’s (1973) seminal contribution on riots in American cities uncovers a curvilinear relationship between political openness and contention, in which middling levels of local democracy produce the highest rates of protest participation. Machado et al. (2011) find that institutional “weakness” breeds higher reliance on street protests, given citizens’ misgivings about the quality of representation they might obtain through formal channels. Moseley (2018) argues that citizens with lower levels of system support—including confidence in elections—are more likely participants in an array of protest activities. Cornell and Grimes (2015) confirm that Latin American citizens who report high levels of trust in elections are less likely to take part in disruptive protests.

Do elections reduce perceptions of protest efficacy and boost perceptions of efficacy associated with formal modes of participation? Or do elections fuel contestation, particularly on the part of scorned losers? On the one hand, Anderson and Mendes (2006) find that voting for a losing candidate fuels protest potential, especially in young democracies and when individuals face consecutive electoral losses. Work on hybrid regimes in the developing world has argued and found that elections can fuel cycles of protest when the process is widely perceived to be fraudulent (Beaulieu 2014; Trejo 2014), but it is unclear if this result would hold in the context of fully democratic elections.

On the other hand, when elections are thought to be free and fair, there is a chance that they help calm the storm. Competitive electoral environments tend to be associated with lower rates of contention compared to local regimes where the playing field is tilted (Arce and Mangonnet 2011; Boulding 2014). Effective election administration is thought to renew individuals' faith in the democratic process, restoring their belief in elections as an effective vehicle for obtaining government responsiveness (Wolak 2017). Machado et al.'s (2011) finding that institutional weakness is strongly correlated with higher rates of participation in street protests in Latin American regimes suggests that elections might appease potential protestors under the right circumstances—that is, holding partisanship constant, Machado et al. find that individuals who are nested in democracies with strong political institutions are less likely to resort to contentious behaviors.

Most of the studies mentioned above use event counts or reported participation in protests to make inferences about the causes of contention. But few existing studies have asked citizens directly about protest efficacy. This is a significant shortcoming in the existing literature, given the difficulty in deducing motivation from participation. While protest participation itself likely reveals a lack of faith in formal means of expressing grievances, without asking citizens directly about their value perceptions of distinct forms of participation, it is difficult to ascertain why some individuals choose contention and others choose voting. Moreover, while there is much theorizing about how institutional opportunities shape contentious behavior, most prominent studies in the literature use cross-sectional data, and little work examines how individuals respond to institutional processes in real time.

### **Efficacy and Elections: A Process of Renewal or Alienation?**

In the midst of widespread declines in support for democracy and trust in institutions, can elections serve as a salve for citizens' perceptions of efficacy? Or do elections exacerbate perceptions among losers that the political system is unresponsive to people like them, fueling contentious modes of participation? We expect that free and fair elections generally boost perceived efficacy related to electoral participation and diminish protest efficacy. But the ways in which those dynamics occur depend on other intervening factors. Here we articulate why we expect elections to affect efficacy associated with different types of participation in different ways, and the potential mechanisms underlying those relationships.

Regardless of who wins, campaigns offer evidence to citizens that elections have consequences—particularly when there is a change in government. Potential protestors might reconsider future mobilization when they view the process as legitimate. Finkel (1985) finds that external efficacy increases following elections, and that voting and campaign participation boost external efficacy, but have little impact on internal efficacy. He finds little support for the notion that participation in peaceful protests boosts efficacy.

According to a study on political efficacy in the U.S. states, higher quality election procedures are associated with higher average external efficacy (Wolak 2017). Wolak also finds that lively partisan competition increases perceptions of internal efficacy, if not external efficacy. Ikeda et al. (2008) find that “political participation [in elections] enhances a voter’s sense of political efficacy, especially when the distinctiveness of the political party system is high” (87). All in all, it seems that mean levels of efficacy increase over the course of elections, even if few studies to this point have asked citizens directly about the efficacy of elections in particular.

The received wisdom on protest efficacy is murkier—mostly because the majority of studies focus on protest participation, rather than attitudes. Bruhn (2008) argues that during the



year leading up to elections, citizens protest at higher rates. But in the aftermath of elections (the “honeymoon” period), anti-government protest activity dies down while more locally oriented protests ramp up. Proportional elections also reduce protest activity, particularly in young democracies, whereas unified opposition parties tend to increase the likelihood of protests following elections (Su 2015). Our first hypothesis as follows:

H1a: Perceived efficacy of electoral participation will *increase* over the course of elections that are free and fair.

H1b: Perceived efficacy of protest will *decrease* over the course of the elections that are free and fair.

### **Potential Mechanisms: Participation, Outcomes, and Information**

If elections boost faith in formal processes and reduce citizens’ proclivity to look to protest for voice, why? What mechanisms underlying the restorative power of elections for citizen perceptions of electoral efficacy? In this section, we look to the existing literature to identify three possible explanations for dynamics of protest and election efficacy during electoral campaigns.

#### *Finding Efficacy through Participation*

Electoral participation itself might serve to shore up citizens’ perceptions of the efficacy of elections. Schlozman et al. (1995, pp. 5-6) argue that participation has downstream consequences for citizens, including “a sense of satisfaction from promoting a cause in which they believe, doing their share, or fulfilling a civic duty.” Riker and Ordeshook (1968) similarly speak of the

“satisfactions” of taking part in elections, as a rejoinder to the seeming irrationality of voting. Finkel (1987) finds that campaign activity boosts external efficacy, but observes no significant effect for protest or voting.

On the other hand, by providing an outlet to disgruntled citizens who might otherwise turn to protest, electoral participation might dull the appeal of contentious action. Whereas high quality elections might boost efficacy associated with voting, honest and competitive elections have been found to decrease citizens’ reliance on protests (Arce and Mangonnet 2011; Machado et al. 2011; Boulding 2014). To our knowledge, no study to this point has asked people directly about the efficacy of protest throughout the course of an election cycle. But it stands to reason participation in the electoral process would diminish perceptions that contentious behaviors are the only way for citizens to effect meaningful change. Building on this literature, we expect that:

H2a: Perceived efficacy of electoral participation will increase among voters.

H2b: Perceived efficacy of protest will decrease or remain stagnant among voters.

### *Efficacious Winners, Alienated Losers*

Ideally, elections build efficacy among all citizens who participate in the process, even among those who vote for losing candidates—the democratic bargain depends on losers accepting the results of elections and committing to playing the democratic game moving forward. Yet losing gracefully is easier said than done. Does voting shore up citizen perceptions of system responsiveness across the board, or does it boost efficacy among winners and alienate losers? *Losers’ Consent* (Anderson et al. 2005) finds evidence for a number of post-election winner/loser gaps in terms of democratic attitudes, including external efficacy. In other words, while supporters

of election winners experience a boost to their perception that the system responds to people like them, losers report declining or stable levels of external efficacy.

Yet the results presented in *Losers' Consent* are largely based on post-election surveys, rather than panel data. Danniler and Mutz (2019) find that losing erodes perceptions of electoral integrity, and the effects of winning and losing are not symmetrical—in other words, losing has a more powerful negative effect on perceptions of electoral integrity than the magnitude of the positive effect associated with winning.

Anderson and Mendes (2006) offer the strongest support for the notion that voting for a losing candidate might buoy perceptions of protest efficacy. They model “protest potential,” which they conceptualize as past protest behavior combined with respondents’ intentions to take part in a variety of protest activities, including street marches and demonstrations. They find that supporters of election losers exhibit significantly higher protest potential than election winners, especially in younger democracies where the rules of the game are less well-established. Anderson and Mendes conclude that “the path to successful democratic consolidation is hazardous during election time and, in large part, requires the support of the electoral losers” (2006, 109). Based on this discussion, we expect that:

H3a: Perceived efficacy of electoral participation will increase among winners and decrease or remain stagnant among losers.

H3b: Perceived efficacy of protest will increase among losers and decrease or remain stagnant among winners.

### *Information and Efficacy*

Elections can provide information to individuals who are otherwise disengaged in politics, building political knowledge (Ikeda et al. 2008). Campaigns increase political awareness through multiple pathways. Campaign advertisements, media coverage, and party mobilization educate citizens about key issues and party platforms. While scholars have speculated that campaigns tend to boost political knowledge primarily among individuals who were already paying close attention to politics (Prior 2005), recent studies indicate that elections can actually reduce knowledge gaps between groups (Ondercin et al. 2011; Smith 2018).

Numerous studies have documented strong correlations between interest, education, and knowledge, respectively, and external efficacy (Craig et al. 1990; Ikeda et al. 2008; Hansen and Pedersen 2014; Nadeau et al. 2008). If elections spur citizens to learn more about candidates and issues, they could in turn boost the perceived efficacy of election participation among both winners and losers—Hansen and Pedersen (2014) find that campaigns raise awareness about politics, which increases external and internal efficacy following elections. But their study does not ask specifically about perceptions of efficacy associated with elections themselves.

When elections are the focus of voters' attention, other forms of extra-institutional behavior might be diminished in terms of their perceived efficacy. Learning about political parties and their positions on key issues might make previously discontented voters more open to the possibility that formal institutions serve as an effective conduit for representation. Drawing from this work, we expect that:

H4a: Perceived efficacy of electoral participation will increase most among those who pay close attention to politics throughout the campaign.

H4b: Perceived efficacy of protest will decrease most among those who pay close attention to politics throughout the campaign.

### **The 2018 Brazilian Presidential Election**

We test these hypotheses in the context of Brazil's 2018 presidential election. This is an important context for the purposes of our project. Starting in 2013 during the run-up to the 2014 FIFA World Cup and subsequent presidential elections, Brazil had somewhat unexpectedly experienced a wave of contentious politics that broke with the trends of much of its third wave democratic experience (Moseley and Layton 2013; Layton 2014). Prior to the outbreak of street demonstrations in 2013, Brazil ranked near the bottom of the Latin American region in terms of contentious behavior. Yet, as shown in Figure 1, 2013 was just the beginning of Brazilians' participation in contentious protests. Drawing on data from the AmericasBarometer, we show the percentage of Brazilian respondents who report participation in a protest in the year prior to each wave of the survey from 2007 through 2019. The 2014 survey shows an uptick in contentious behavior compared to previous survey waves, likely reflecting the widespread national protests of 2013; however, this is overshadowed by the near doubling of protest participation by the 2017 wave of the AmericasBarometer, when 13.3% of Brazilians report having participated in a protest in the year prior to the survey, likely reflecting the contentious mobilizations surrounding the controversial impeachment of then-president Dilma Rousseff in 2016. Even though the 2019 wave of the AmericasBarometer detects a decline in protest behavior, note that 10.6% of respondents still report participation in a protest in the year prior to that survey, which is the second-highest rate of protest participation in the AmericasBarometer series for Brazil.



**Figure 1. Self-Reported Participation in Protest, Brazil 2007-2019. Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP; accounts for survey design-effects**

Given the growth in the use of protest as a tool to give voice to the demands of Brazilians in the run-up to the 2018 presidential election, we are more confident in the viability of testing how the election shaped voters’ perceptions of the relative efficacy of different forms of political action.

### **Data and Methods**

To test our hypotheses, we draw on our original Brazilian Democracy in the Balance five-wave online panel study. The study includes three waves conducted before Brazil’s 2018 presidential elections and two after. The first wave of the study included 2,018 respondents.

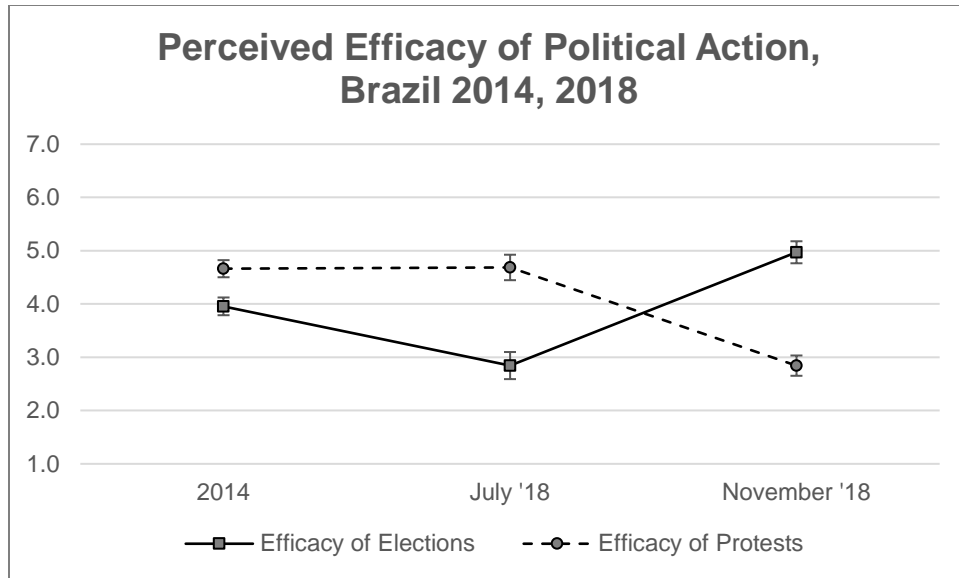
Our dependent variables are drawn from waves one (July 2018 at the official start of the campaign) and four (late October/early November following the October 28 runoff election). We adapted an item from the American National Election Studies efficacy battery to measure *perceived efficacy of elections* and *perceived efficacy of protest*: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Elections make the government pay attention to what the

people think;” and “Protests and strikes make the government pay attention to what the people think.”<sup>1</sup> These adapted items were first piloted in the 2014 wave of the AmericasBarometer in Brazil, and we include some results from that survey as a point of comparison for our analysis.

We model within-subject change in responses to these questions between the first and fourth waves of the study. Originally, responses are scaled from 1 to 7, where ‘1’ means “strongly disagree” and ‘7’ means “strongly agree.” Figure 2 shows changes in mean responses to these items between waves one and four, with results from the 2014 AmericasBarometer provided for comparison. In the 2014 wave of the AmericasBarometer, the mean response for perceived efficacy of elections was 3.96 and for perceived efficacy of protests it was 4.66. This 0.70-point difference is statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Among respondents who participated in both the first and fourth waves of the 2018 panel survey and had valid responses on both items, mean responses for perceived efficacy of elections rose from an average of 2.84 to 4.97 between the two waves, a statistically and substantively significant difference of 2.13 points ( $p < 0.001$ ) on the 1 to 7 scale. By contrast, perceived efficacy of protest fell from an average of 4.69 to 2.84, a difference of 1.84 points ( $p < 0.001$ ) on the 1 to 7 scale. These findings are consistent with H1a and H1b.

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<sup>1</sup> The original ANES item we adapted has been included in all waves of that survey since 1964 and reads: “How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think? [A GOOD DEAL, SOME, or NOT MUCH].” The ANES has never asked about the efficacy of protest, but waves from 1966 to 1980 asked about the efficacy of political parties, and the 1972 wave included a question about the efficacy of interest groups.



**Figure 2. Perceived Efficacy of Political Action, Brazil 2014, 2018, N(2014)= 1,487, adjusted for survey design-effects; N(2018)=906, weighted**

These initial results require some discussion to unpack the initial implications. For one, the results from the AmericasBarometer suggest that as early as 2014, Brazilians, on average, saw protest as more efficacious than elections. The same pattern emerges in our pre-election wave in the panel study. Yet, our follow-up wave after the election may give us some pause about the 2014 results, because those cross-sectional data were collected prior to the 2014 presidential election. Our panel study suggests that in the immediate aftermath of the 2018 presidential election, Brazilians reversed their prior opinions, now ranking the efficacy of elections ahead of that of protests. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing whether similar patterns occurred in the wake of the 2014 presidential election, but we can assess the dynamics of our 2018 results to better understand how Brazilians' perceptions of alternative forms of political action responded to a highly salient campaign and election.

What explains the substantial shift in opinion regarding the efficacy of political action in the panel study? To model changes in individual responses across waves of the survey, we take



the within-respondent difference between fourth wave responses and first wave responses on each question and then recode a new categorical variable where ‘-1’ means the respondent’s reported score declined between waves; ‘0’ means there was no within-subject change in response between waves; and ‘1’ means the response score increased between waves. We use multinomial logit to model the resulting categorical variable.

Our key independent variables include measures of *voter turnout* and *protest participation*, measures of *vote choice*, and measures of *political interest* and *news consumption*. For *voter turnout*, we have wave one self-reported measures of turnout in the 2014 presidential elections (first round) and wave four and five 2018 election turnout (first and second rounds). For 2014, wave one respondents answered a question that asked: “Did you vote in the 2014 presidential elections?” Affirmative responses were coded in an indicator variable for turnout. For 2018, wave four and five respondents answered two questions that asked, “Here is a list of candidates in the first round of the 2018 presidential election. Which candidate did you vote for in the first round?” and “Which candidate did you vote for in the second round?” Response options included the possibility of noting an abstention. Voting for any of the valid candidates or voting blank/null were counted as turnout for the purposes of the 2018 election.

We have two measures of *protest participation*. First, in waves one and five respondents answered a question that asked: “In the last 12 months, have you participated in a demonstration or public protest?” In wave four, respondents answered a question that asked: “In the last 4 months, meaning since July 2018, have you participated in a demonstration or public protest?” This was intended to measure participation in protests during the official campaign window.

To measure *vote choice*, we draw on the questions from the 2018 *voter turnout* indicators. In this case, we include abstention as one of several options for respondents, including abstention,

voting blank/null, voting for the winning candidate (Jair Bolsonaro), or voting for any other losing candidate.<sup>2</sup>

To measure *interest in politics*, we asked respondents in waves one and five, “How interested are you in politics?” Response options included “a lot,” “some,” “a little,” or “not at all.” Responses are recoded from 0 to 3, where ‘0’ indicates “not at all” and 3 indicates “a lot.” To measure *news consumption*, we asked waves one, three, and five respondents, “How often do you pay attention to the news, whether on TV, the radio, in the newspapers, or on the internet?” Respondents could answer, “never,” “rarely,” “a few times a month,” “a few times a week,” or “daily.” We recode responses from 0 to 4, where ‘0’ means “never” and ‘4’ indicates “daily.”

In addition to these key independent variables, we include several standard demographic and socioeconomic control variables in our models. These include indicators for respondent gender (male/female), age, socioeconomic class,<sup>3</sup> level of education completed,<sup>4</sup> self-identified race,<sup>5</sup> and region of residence.<sup>6</sup>

## Results

We first test the association between voter turnout and change in the perceived efficacy of elections and protest. Given that we are using multinomial logit regression to conduct our tests, the estimated coefficients of the models can be difficult to interpret. Accordingly, we reserve our presentation of the full table of coefficients for the appendix. Here we present the predicted probabilities of

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<sup>2</sup> We can also measure *vote choice* in 2014, which we code in a similar manner: abstention, vote blank/null, vote for Dilma Rousseff (winner), or vote for another candidate (loser).

<sup>3</sup> This measure is provided by Netquest, who was contracted to provide the online sample.

<sup>4</sup> Respondents answered a wave 1 question that asked “What was the last year of schooling that you completed?” where responses were recoded to indicate completion of none/primary, secondary, or tertiary schooling.

<sup>5</sup> Potential racial categories were based on the Brazilian Census categories: “White,” “Brown,” “Black,” “Indigenous,” and “Asian/Other.”

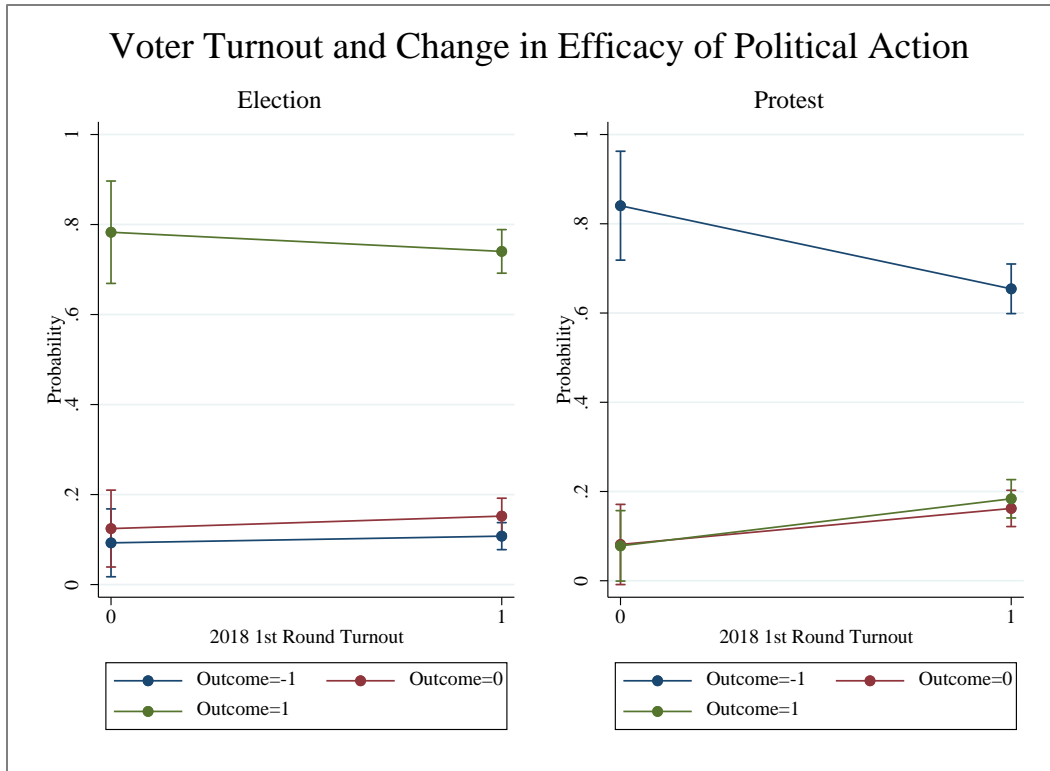
<sup>6</sup> Region of residence is also provide by Netquest.

changes in the perceived efficacy of elections and protest across relevant values of our key independent variables, controlling for standard demographic and socioeconomic metrics.

Figure 3 presents the predicted probabilities of changes in efficacy for respondents' self-reported turnout in the first round of the 2018 presidential election. The left side of the panel shows that there is essentially no difference between the two types of respondents in terms of their patterns of change on the perceived efficacy of elections. In other words, the increase seen in perceived efficacy of elections was not a function of participating in the election as a voter. By contrast, the right side of the panel shows that there are some statistically significant differences between voters and non-voters in terms of their changes in perceived efficacy of protest. Non-voters were more likely than voters to report a *decline* in their perceived efficacy of protest. Voters, by comparison were more likely to report an *increase* on their perceived efficacy of protest. This finding entirely contradicts the relationships we initially hypothesized in H2a and H2b.<sup>7</sup>

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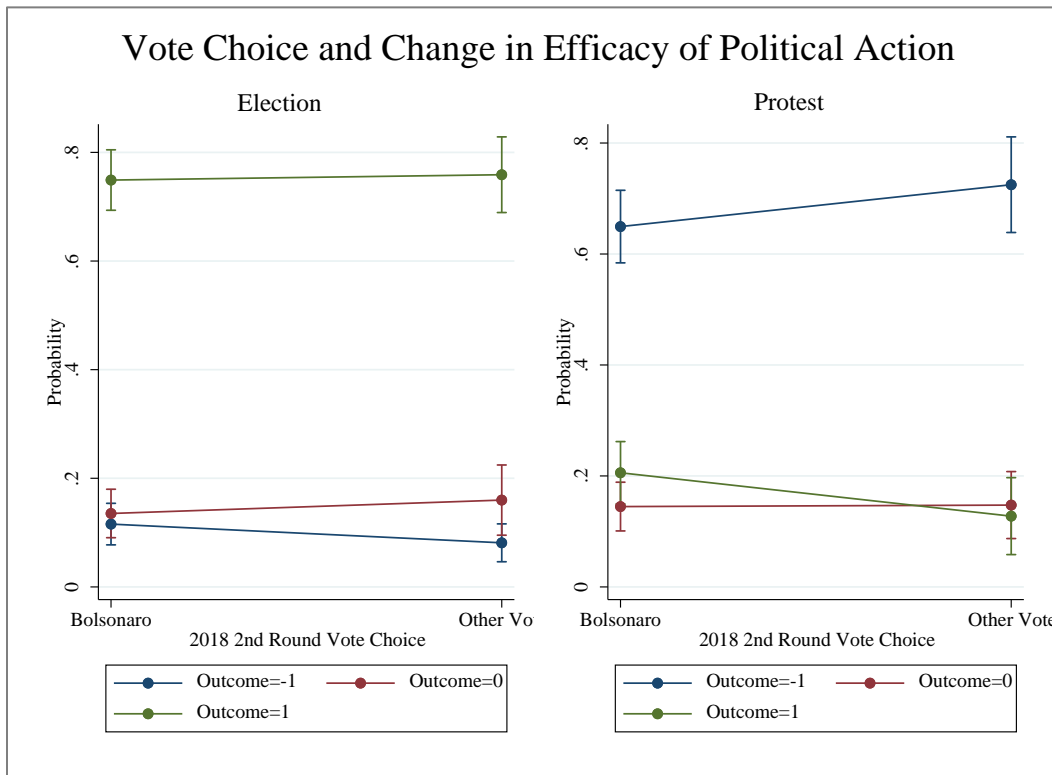
<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that we cannot replicate this finding for self-reported second round turnout in the 2018 election or for self-reported first round turnout in the 2014 presidential election.



**Figure 3. Voter Turnout and the Predicted Probabilities of Change in the Perceived Efficacy of Political Action (Election and Protest), Brazil 2018**

Now we move to the model testing the relationship between vote choice and perceived efficacy of elections and protest. Figure 4 presents the predicted probabilities of changes in efficacy for respondents' self-reported vote choice (voting for winning or losing candidates only – see the Appendix for results from abstainers and voting black/null) in the second round of the 2018 presidential election. Once again, the left side of the panel shows that there are no statistically significant differences between respondents who voted for the winning candidate (Bolsonaro) and respondents who voted for the losing candidate (Fernando Haddad). In short, vote choice was not the driving factor behind shifts in the perceived efficacy of elections among Brazilians in the 2018 election. Similarly, in this case, the right side of the panel shows no statistically significant shifts between Bolsonaro and Haddad voters in terms of changes in the perceived efficacy of protest. At

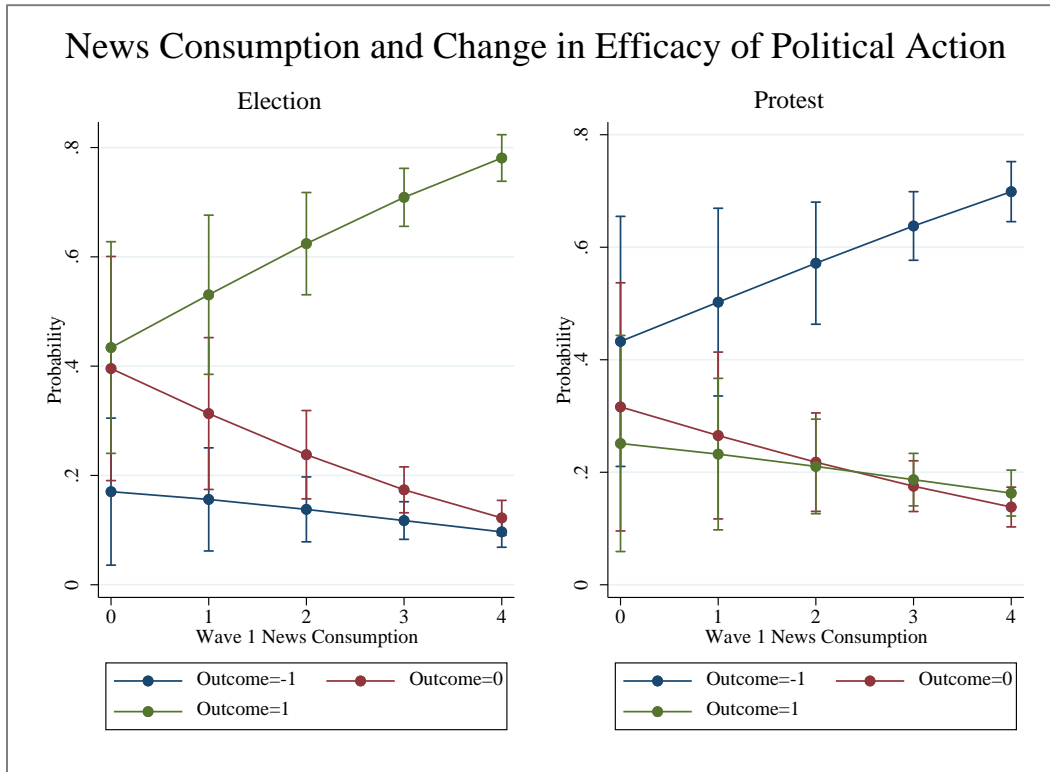
the margins, one might say that Haddad voters are less likely than Bolsonaro voters to report an *increase* in their perceived efficacy of protest (a shift of 7.8 percentage points,  $p=0.086$ ), but the correlation is tenuous. Either way, these findings are inconsistent with H3a and H3b.



**Figure 4. Vote Choice and the Predicted Probabilities of Change in the Perceived Efficacy of Political Action (Election and Protest), Brazil 2018**

Finally, we come to Figure 5, based on the model testing a relationship between news consumption and the efficacy of political action. This figure presents the predicted probabilities of changes in efficacy based on respondents' self-reported level of news consumption at the beginning of Brazil's 2018 presidential election campaign. The left side of the panel shows that respondents who reported daily consumption of the news were significantly more likely than their less involved peers to report an *increase* in their perceived efficacy of elections, and significantly less likely to report no change. In a near mirror image, the right side of the panel shows that

respondents who consumed more news were more likely to report a *decrease* in their perceived efficacy of protest. These findings are consistent with H4a and H4b.



**Figure 5. News Consumption and the Predicted Probabilities of Change in the Perceived Efficacy of Political Action (Election and Protest), Brazil 2018**

### Discussion and Conclusion

The results we present here are consistent with a dynamic perspective on efficacy. It is clear from our data that people’s sense of efficacy can shift dramatically, but in predictable ways, in the relatively short period of an election cycle. Although our research design cannot fully address whether our results are the consequence of an incumbent’s defeat or the unique circumstances of Brazil’s unstable and contentious politics leading up to the 2018 presidential election, we have been able to assess some of the potential mechanisms behind the dynamics observed in our case. These mechanisms include the effects of participation, the objective outcomes and winner/loser dynamics of a competitive electoral process, and access to information. Independent of

demographic and socioeconomic features, we have shown that, of these three, the information mechanism is the one most directly associated with changes in the perceived efficacy of elections and protest.

While it is possible that these results are specific to the case at hand, it is nevertheless remarkable that amid a contentious political cycle like that experienced by Brazilians in the run-up to the 2018 election, it is the informational pathway that seems to best predict shifts in perceived efficacy rather than the mode or outcome of participation in the process itself. Still, there are future lines of research to pursue to better contextualize these findings. For one, we need to address the possibility that these results are an artifact of an online sample. Our sample skews heavily to the high news consumption end of the information-seeking scale and our respondents reported a high level of turnout in the 2018 election. Nevertheless, there is not a similar skew in terms of interest in politics, participation in protests, or turnout in the 2014 election (which is more in line with the official results).

Our study is the first to our knowledge to explicitly compare citizens' perceptions of the efficacy of elections and protest. We find that citizens' perceptions may shift during a campaign. We believe that these findings have important implications for the study of democratic processes and representation. It seems reasonable that citizens would find different forms of political action efficacious at different points in the electoral and governing cycle. Thus, it seems that neither elections nor protest can claim a permanent role as the preferred instrument of representation and democracy for citizens seeking to express their political voice.

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